

"What do you believe is true even though you cannot prove it?" (Edge.org, World Research Center, 2005, http://edge.org/q2005/q05_5.html)

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We're living longer, and thinking shorter.

[Disclaimer: Since I'm not a scientist, I'm not even going to attempt to take on something scientific. Rather, I want to talk about something that can't easily be measured, let alone proved.]

And second, though what I'm saying may sound gloomy, I love the times we live in. There has never been a time more interesting, more full of things to explain, interesting people to meet, worthy causes to support, challenging problems to solve.]

It's all about time.

I think modern life has fundamentally and paradoxically changed our sense of time. Even as we live longer, we seem to think shorter. Is it because we cram more into each hour? Or because the next person over seems to cram more into each hour?

For a variety of reasons, everything is happening much faster and more things are happening. Change is a constant.

It used to be that machines automated work, giving us more time to do other things. But now machines automate the production of attention-consuming information, which takes our time. For example, if one person sends the same e-mail message to 10 people, then 10 people have to respond.

The physical friction of everyday life—the time it took Isaac Newton to travel by coach from London to Cambridge, the dead spots of walking to work (no iPod), the darkness that kept us from reading—has disappeared, making every minute not used *productively* into an opportunity cost.

And finally, we can measure more, over smaller chunks of time. From airline miles to calories (and carbs and fat grams), from *friends* on Friendster to steps on a pedometer, from realtime stock prices to millions of burgers consumed, we count things by the minute and the second.

Unfortunately, this carries over into how we think and plan: Businesses focus on short-term results; politicians focus on elections; school systems focus on test results; most of us focus on the weather rather than the climate. Everyone *knows* about the big problems, but their behavior focuses on the here and now.

I first noticed this phenomenon in a big way in the US right after 9/11, when it became impossible to schedule an appointment or get anyone to make a commitment. To me, it felt like Russia (where I had been spending time since 1989), where people avoided long-term plans because there was little discernible relationship between effort and result. Suddenly, even in the US, people were behaving like the Russians of those days, reluctant to plan for anything more than a few days out.

Of course, that immediate crisis has passed, but there's still the same sense of unpredictability dogging our thinking in the US (in particular). Best to concentrate on the current quarter, because who knows what job I'll have next year. Best to pass that test, because what I actually learn won't be worth much ten years from now anyway.

How can we reverse this?

It's a social problem, but I think it may also herald a mental one—which I describe as mental diabetes.

Whatever's happening to adults, most of us grew up reading books (at least occasionally) and playing with "uninteractive" toys that required us to make up our own stories, dialogue and behavior for them. Today's children are living in an information-rich, time-compressed environment that often seems to replace a child's imagination rather than stimulate it. I posit that being fed so much processed information—video, audio, images, flashing screens, talking toys, simulated action games—is akin to being fed too much processed, sugar-rich food. It may seriously mess up children's information metabolism and their ability to process information for themselves. In other words, will they be able to discern cause and effect, to put together a coherent story line, to think scientifically?

I don't know the answers, but these questions are worth thinking about, for the long term.

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Source C

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The following is excerpted from a book about science and technology.

We're living longer and thinking shorter.

It's all about time.

Modern life has fundamentally and paradoxically changed our sense of time. Even as we live longer, we seem to think shorter. Is it because we cram more into each hour, or because the next person over seems to cram more into each hour? For a variety of reasons, everything is happening much faster, and more things are happening. Change is a constant.

It used to be that machines automated work, giving us more time to do other things, but now machines automate the production of attention-consuming information, which *takes* our time. For example, if one person sends the same e-mail message to ten people, then ten people (in theory) should give it their attention. And that's a low-end example.

The physical friction of everyday life—the time it took Isaac Newton to travel by coach from London to Cambridge, the dead spots of walking to work (no iPod), the darkness that kept us from reading—has disappeared, making every minute not used productively into an opportunity lost.

And finally, we can measure more, over smaller chunks of time. From airline miles to calories (and carbs and fat grams), from friends on Friendster to steps on a pedometer, from real-time stock prices to millions of burgers consumed, we count things by the minute and the second. Unfortunately, this carries over into how we think and plan: Businesses focus on short-term results; politicians focus on elections; school systems focus on test results; most of us focus on the weather rather than on the climate. Everyone knows about the big problems, but their behavior focuses on the here and now. . . .

How can we reverse this?

It's a social problem, but I think it may also herald a mental one—which I imagine as a sort of mental diabetes. Most of us grew up reading books (at least occasionally) and playing with noninteractive toys that required us to make up our own stories, dialogue, and behavior for them. But today's children are living in an information-rich, time-compressed environment that often seems to stifle a child's imagination rather than stimulate it. Being fed so much processed information—video, audio, images, flashing screens, talking toys, simulated action games—is like being fed too much processed, sugar-rich food. It may seriously mess up children's informational metabolism—their ability to process information for themselves. Will they be able to discern cause and effect, put together a coherent story line, think scientifically, read a book with a single argument rather than a set of essays?

I don't know the answers, but these questions are worth thinking about, for the long term.